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# Evaluation of the national human development report system
## Executive summary

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# I. Introduction

1. National human development reports (NHDRs) are now produced or overseen by more than 130 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country and regional offices. Since their inception in 1992, over 550 reports and a great number of disaggregated and supplementary human development indices (HDIs) have been produced, reflecting national and local conditions as no global instrument can.

2. In January 2000, the business plans of the UNDP Administrator identified the global Human Development Report (HDR) and the NHDR as major pillars of the analytical and policy work of the organization. That same year, a corporate policy was laid down to govern the production and dissemination of NHDRs.

3. The basic objectives of NHDRs include: (a) raising public awareness and triggering action on critical human development concerns; (b) strengthening national statistical and analytic capacity to assess and promote people-centred development; and (c) shaping policies and programmes by providing options and broad recommendations based on concrete analysis.

4. This evaluation report summarizes the main findings of 16 evaluative studies conducted by the team. It aims to provide lessons and recommendations for NHDR teams in country offices around the world, policymakers and UNDP managers in the Bureau of Development Policy, the Human Development Report Office (HDRO), the Executive Office, the Operations Support Group, the regional bureaux and the regional centres.

# II. Approach and methodology

5. This evaluation exercise addresses the following four questions:

(a) *Appropriateness*. Is the NHDR system the most suitable vehicle to promote human development approaches?

(b) *Relevance*. How strategically relevant and necessary is the system of NHDRs to UNDP?

(c) *Effectiveness*. Has the NHDR system made a difference, i.e., has it had an influence on the environment and agenda of a country? What worked, and why?

(d) *Sustainability*. Is the NHDR system sustainable?

6. The terms of reference for this evaluation were developed through a consultative process using professional networks of evaluators and human development experts worldwide. The methodology for the evaluation was developed by the team in an inception workshop with input from a methodology expert panel that had convened earlier. Particular attention was given to finding practical ways of assessing the often amorphous, diffuse and indirect influence and impact of an intellectual-political exercise such as the NHDR. The main variables selected to assess influence and impact included: improvement of human development-related statistics; increasing awareness of the human development concept and related issues; expansion of policy dialogue; and impact on changing policies in a pro-human development direction.

7. Seven countries were chosen for in-depth field studies involving country visits by the team: Albania, Armenia, Brazil, Egypt, India, Senegal and Zambia. Given the

wide variations in country contexts and NHDR production processes – and the limited resources and time available – it was not possible to conduct in-depth studies using a representative sample of countries producing NHDRs. Instead, countries were chosen to ensure regional representation and provide forward-looking lessons and best/worst practices, so as to better understand: (a) how NHDRs can influence policymaking and development planning; and (b) the best practices for producing and disseminating NHDRs, so that these can be adopted elsewhere.

8. To supplement this information, desk reviews were conducted in eight other countries – Bolivia, Botswana, Bulgaria, Colombia, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Tanzania and Ukraine. The desk reviews were based mainly on documentary evidence and e-mail correspondence with select stakeholders. A final study was conducted at UNDP headquarters to assess the policy frameworks and incentives connected with NHDRs. Information from those sixteen reports provided the basis for the present evaluation report.

9. The country reports and this synthesis report were reviewed, for factual accuracy and to remove errors of omission and interpretation, by key stakeholders within and outside UNDP. The present report has been reviewed by an advisory panel and a peer review panel for methodological soundness and validity of claims.

## III. Key findings

*Influence of NHDRs*

10. The NHDR programme has been marked by significant achievements, given its limited resources, the relatively short period of time it has existed, and the constraints it has faced at both the national and the global level. In virtually all the countries reviewed, the NHDR succeeded in spreading and inserting the concept of human development and human development-related ideas into the development discourse. In several countries, that accomplishment included the new or improved production of human development-related statistics, including those needed to calculate the major human development indices. In most countries studied, NHDRs have had some success in steering policies in a human development-oriented direction. In some, they have even resulted in deeper analysis of the socio-political obstacles to improving the human development situation, and have broached crucial issues that are often difficult to discuss because of political sensitivities. A country-by-country summary is provided in Chapter 3 of the evaluation.

11. These findings support the argument that if one wishes to promote human development, the NHDR is the principal instrument available to UNDP for defining what that goal means at the national level and for analysing the obstacles to implementing it. The NHDR thus makes the UNDP 'brand' unique, for no other international organization is responsible for presenting and promoting human development in its full complexity.

12. Although the evaluation finds that the NHDRs have contributed greatly to fulfilling the distinctive mission of UNDP to promote human development challenges, there are limitations and constraints within the NHDR process. Since no other national-level instrument exists for analysing and propounding human development, identifying the chief obstacles to its furtherance and suggesting

effective policies for overcoming them, UNDP headquarters and country offices should support, strengthen and improve the NHDR programme.

13. To do so, the evaluation includes a series of recommendations.

# IV. Recommendations

***For decision-makers at the corporate level***

## A. UNDP should regard the NHDR programme as a core component of its mission and provide stronger support.

14. If the unique contribution of UNDP among international organizations is its presentation and promotion of human development in all its complexity, then the NHDR is the only holistic representation of that role at the national level. First and foremost, stronger support for the NHDR system should take the form of political support. Headquarters should expressly give high priority to the NHDR system and not permit the programme to be pushed aside by new initiatives that regularly crop up on the agenda. Headquarters should formulate a clear policy regarding the relationship between the NHDR, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) report and the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP), as called for in the recommendation below, and otherwise focus on solving the problem of competition among those programmes for scarce human resources that has developed in some countries, to the detriment of the NHDR.

15. Furthermore, NHDRs should be integrated within the existing accountability mechanisms (including multi year funding framework reporting lines, relevant UNDP thematic trust funds, and evaluations) and incentive systems of UNDP.

16. While headquarters support for the NHDR system should be strengthened, measures taken to do this must not in any way compromise the decentralized nature of the programme or weaken the existing autonomy of country offices.

## B. UNDP should clarify the relationship between the NHDR and other instruments and exercises.

17. *First, UNDP should clarify the relationship with other UNDP and United Nations programmes.* A clear United Nations corporate policy on the exact relationship between the NHDR, the MDG report and PRSP is needed. The complementarities and differences in purpose among these instruments should be recognized. The competitive relationship for time, attention, resources, and political capital must be better managed so as to ensure an enabling environment for the NHDR programme. The independence of the NHDR programme must be protected.

18. To promote the use of NHDRs in United Nations system-wide efforts to achieve development goals, UNDP should promote greater involvement of the United Nations country teams in the process of report preparation.

19. *UNDP should promote a more productive two-way interaction between the global and national HDRs.* The upward influence of NHDRs on the global HDR has been smaller and less productive than could and should be the case. The value of NHDRs should receive closer attention at headquarters, and HDRO should implement its plans to conduct mission exchanges as well as joint outreach and advocacy efforts.

## C. Encourage international capacity transfer through more regional workshops and bilateral exchanges.

20. The best tools for effecting international transfer to improve NHDR capacity have been regional workshops organized by HDRO and regional bureaux, and bilateral exchanges (some of them intercontinental). These initiatives should be introduced where absent and strengthened where practiced.

***For country offices: production and dissemination processes***

## D. Emphasize national ownership of the NHDR

21. The degree of national ownership should be increased as much as is compatible with ensuring political independence and analytic quality, bearing in mind that national ownership does not mean government ownership.

## E. Clarify and productively utilize the relationship between HDR and many other exercises.

22. Such exercises include the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and country programme documents, as well as civil society organization and private sector reports and national development planning documents, among others, which overlap with NHDRs to varying degrees.

23. Move from introducing the discourse of human development to a deeper analysis of the challenges it faces.

24. As NHDRs and human development concepts gain acceptance, the NHDR should sharpen its analysis of impediments to human development and means of overcoming them. This is likely to require broaching politically and/or socially sensitive issues. Experience suggests that analytical excellence, combined with appropriate tact and skill, can make it possible to deal frankly with sensitive topics.

## F. Revisit themes

25. There is value in revisiting some earlier issues. Precisely because the NHDRs have frequently taken up some of the most basic and general issues in their early years – such as poverty, inequality and gender – there is a need to use subsequent NHDRs to check the progress on those issues in the light of changed circumstances and with the possibility of using deeper analyses and a more creative approach. In doing so, NHDRs should always take advantage of opportunities for complementarity with the MDG reports, since these, by design, eschew critical analysis of policies from the perspective of advancing the MDGs – a job that the NHDRs can take on.

## G. Disaggregate statistics to cover sensitive issues

26. Disaggregating human development-related indices has proved useful for many countries, particularly those with high (geographic, social and economic) inequalities. Disaggregation has often initially taken a geographic form since this is less controversial and may have political 'champions', such as mayors and governors. It is important, however, to progress to more controversial kinds of disaggregation, such as race, gender or caste – characteristics that are generally more important than geography in determining human development outcomes.

## H. Avoid report fatigue and long gaps

27. Both report fatigue from excessive frequency and policy irrelevance from long gaps between reports are to be avoided. The optimal gap is probably two years, or three if circumstances require. Cogency and policy relevance are crucial, and frequency should be determined based on these, and country-specific considerations.

## I. Improve monitoring of NHDR impact

28. Systematic monitoring of the results of past NHDRs is a weak link in the NHDR régime. UNDP country offices should build such systematic monitoring into their NHDR programmes and make the results publicly available.

## J. Improve the monitoring and evaluation of policies

29. Systematic evaluation of policy results and performance is a crucial but weak facet of public policy in many countries. A useful contribution of future NHDRs would be to develop practical methods for monitoring and evaluating policies and programmes with respect to their human development content and impact.

## K. Strengthen outreach efforts.

30. *Knowledge produced in the course of the NHDR process should be made public*. UNDP country offices should make it clear that all knowledge generated in the process of preparing the NHDR should be placed in the public domain. Clear guidelines from UNDP headquarters would be useful. UNDP should also make background papers available on an accessible website.

31. *Produce different versions of the reports tailored to different groups*. The impact of the NHDR is enhanced when there are different versions available tailored to the needs and the abilities of different groups of the population. Potentially useful versions are shorter versions for time-strapped policymakers, simpler versions for public consumption, and, where applicable, vernacular versions.

32. *Make access to the NHDR easier*. NHDR availability has been a problem in some countries. Copies should be distributed widely and be available in the public domain. UNDP country offices should post their NHDRs on their websites; this has not been done in a surprising number of countries. HDRO is now promoting efforts to have new reports be available online. As online access to information becomes increasingly important, UNDP should find, develop and utilize the most effective and user-friendly software for exploiting the great potential of online public access.

33. *Introduce human development material into university and school curricula*. Getting materials into the educational system can be an effective way of spreading human development ideas in the long run. Some countries have already succeeded in promoting human development material in university and even school curricula, but other countries have yet to try. Such attempts should be encouraged.

34. *Conduct activities to strengthen the capacity of society to absorb human development ideas through better education programmes*. NHDRs are more effective when society is more capable of understanding and debating basic human development-related ideas. Such capacity can be enhanced through education and information programmes targeted at different groups, including academics, policymakers, journalists, students and the general public.